

Students challenged at Hinterbrand Lodge

By Heidi Hall
"Jet 48" correspondent

High in the Bavarian Alps, in a gentle spring snowfall, 32 middle school students from RAF Lakenheath and Sembach AB, Germany, make their way up a rugged, winding mountain trail. Suddenly, the group breaks off the trail in knee-deep snow. Anxiety mounts as the students, dressed only in swim suits and running shoes, confront the icy water before them and, one by one, plunge in.

"I really thought I was going to die," said one eighth grader. "I can't believe I did it."

The students are not insane. They have accepted the challenge of Hinterbrand Lodge, the DODDS Outdoor Education program located near Berchtesgaden, Germany. Based on the Colorado Outward Bound program, Hinterbrand Lodge provides a unique experience to students and is designed to challenge them mentally, emotionally and physically through experiential learning.

Experiential learning is a method of teaching whereby challenges are given to students, and they have to figure out the solution on their own. This method provides students with the opportunity to immediately recognize and learn from mistakes as well as successes.

Teachers aren't constricted by bells in the classroom, said Sandy Williamson-Merchat, one of four Hinterbrand Lodge instructors. "Up here, we (students) can take all day to complete an initiative, if necessary."

To develop self image and perseverance, students at Hinterbrand Lodge must call upon their own strengths and resources while working effectively within a group. No task is complete until each member of the group has succeeded.

After conquering the frigid "run and dip," 31 students exchanged high-fives and hugs



Students at Hinterbrand Lodge have to work together as a team to overcome the obstacles they face.

and eagerly anticipated the warmth of the lodge. But fear had seized one member as he stood quaking in the cold. The group began chanting for him to "go!"

Stomps and cheers filled the air as the terrified young man plunged into his fear with both feet.

Even students who can't bring themselves to complete the various initiatives learn from the experience. One student, unable to overcome her fear of heights on the zip-line, which is a cable suspended between two trees that the students slide across on, pushed herself to scale the rappel tower. Later, as the group re-hashed the day's events, she identified her fear as a self-imposed limitation.

"I wish I hadn't gotten so upset over the zip-line, but I felt really proud of myself when I got up the rappel tower," she said.

In turn, group members recognized that challenges are different for everyone — success for one may be completing a course, while success for another may simply be making an attempt.

Looking back on the week, the students agreed that although the trip was worth it, it wasn't always fun. For example, before they arrived at the lodge, the students worked to raise money for the trip, followed strict nutritional guidelines and prepared physically. Throughout the week, students assume total responsibility for their personal needs and equipment as well as meal preparation and clean-up. Television, video-games and stereos are not available. The students are awakened early in the morning and involved in activities late into the night, with virtually no personal time.

Why then, would anyone willingly participate in such a program? The answer is evident in the eyes of a student who, moments before, stood trembling on a small platform high above the ground.

"Just take a step," coaxed lodge instructor Bud Foster. "Then go a little farther than you think you can."

"I was so scared," said this seventh grader. "But I just kept going."

Whether the challenge was conquering fear of physical discomfort, encountering strange people or strange food, taking the lead or following orders, or even living without junk food, the students persevered and pushed themselves farther than ever before.

To which they all said it was an accomplishment that they'll always remember and be proud of.

Students receive instruction for their next challenge.

